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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: PANAMA'S ELECTION CAMPAIGN: VERAGUAS PROVINCE IS  
TORRIJOS-LANDIA

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Summary  
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1. (SBU) On March 14, seven weeks before Panama's May 2 general elections, PolOffs toured rural Veraguas province with members of three of the four party coalitions vying for the presidency and 78 legislative seats. Though Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) presidential candidate Martin Torrijos lost the province in 1999, most interlocutors said they expect a big Torrijos victory this year. Torrijos coattails will almost surely return three of four PRD incumbent legislators. Torrijos appears to attract Veraguas voters worried about agricultural unemployment. Solidarity Party presidential candidate Guillermo Endara's "anti-corruption" message is not getting traction in Veraguas, and his campaign manager Menalco Solis already concedes an across-the-board loss in the province. While the PRD machine in Veraguas is formidable, the Torrijos campaign is not taking any chances, and is fighting Arnulfista Party "dirty tricks" with its own.

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Background  
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2. (U) Rising up from jungle-surrounded subsistence farms on the Atlantic coast to small coffee plots in the mountainous continental divide and then back down to expansive cattle-grazing plains and fishing villages along the Pacific coast, Veraguas is Panama's third largest voting province with 7.5% of the national electorate. Dictator General Omar Torrijos, father of Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) presidential candidate Martin Torrijos, was a Veraguas native son, from the province's capital, Santiago, where more than elsewhere in Panama, PRD campaign paraphernalia includes the dictator's image. Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso carried the province in 1999 by just 3,941 votes, but the PRD captured four of the province's six legislative seats.

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Home, Sweet Home  
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3. (U) This year, Torrijos should win Veraguas by a comfortable margin, taking with him at least three of four PRD incumbent legislators. PRD Veraguas elections coordinator Arturo Fabrega predicted Torrijos would win as much as 65% of the vote, holding Arnulfista Party presidential candidate Jose Miguel Aleman to 20%. Fabrega also stated that the fourth PRD incumbent, Pedro Miguel Gonzalez, is in a close race with Arnulfista legislative challenger Jose "Pepe" Gomez (septel). Gomez concurred that Veraguas is "Torrijos country" and that at least three PRD-PP legislative candidates would win. Menalco Solis, campaign manager for Solidarity Party presidential candidate Guillermo Endara and accompanying the candidate on a March 14 caravan through Veraguas, did not believe Endara or Solidarity's legislative candidates would do well in Veraguas. Solidarity had problems finding and has problems retaining "suplente" (alternate legislator) candidates. PRD Fabrega told PolOffs of first-time, walk-in campaign volunteers being offered spots on the ballot and of a number of Solidarity candidates later withdrawing. Endara's March 14 tour of the province was to buck-up Solidarity's legislative candidates, but conceding a Torrijos victory, Endara has no plans to return.

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Playing to the Crowd  
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4. (U) Endara's "anti-corruption" focus has received scant attention from Veraguas voters who are more concerned about agricultural unemployment. Not even Endara's choice for

second vice president (and former Moscoso Agriculture Minister) Alejandro Posse has helped attract this rural vote.

According to PRD Fabrega and Arnulfista Gomez, and as witnessed by PolOffs who accompanied both parties' candidates on "caminatas" (door-to-door campaigning), Veraguas voters are asking for the GOP's help to improve crop yields. Demands for agricultural subsidies or protective tariffs are not prevalent, and the possible US-Panama free trade agreement (FTA) is so far a non-issue. Fabrega claimed that Torrijos has found support by promising low-interest farming loans and by attacking Moscoso's Agriculture Ministry for not providing enough training on the latest farming methods. These themes also resonate with Santiago voters who work in farming-related industries and with independent voters. The Torrijos campaign, especially, is going after those two demographics, hitting houses in the provincial capital as many as three times before the May 2 elections and setting the goal of 10,000 independents for the Torrijos column. Every street is divided and assigned a warden ("segmentacion"), and "converts" are put through a party orientation.

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Tit for Tat?  
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15. (SBU) PRD Fabrega plans to avoid the mistakes made in 1999 that lost the province to Moscoso. In addition to the above noted "caminatas," "segmentacion" system and party orientations, Fabrega will monitor exit poll results from 21 voting centers which represent 70% of the province's electorate. Based on the data, Fabrega plans to focus last-minute get-out-the-vote efforts. Aside from these legitimate election tactics, when Fabrega was asked about "vote buying" and "vote verification"-- elderly voters pressured to claim disabled status, which allows someone else to accompany them into the voting booth-- instead of responding, he counter-charged that the Arnulfistas are buying voter cards to tamp down PRD totals. Fabrega implied that the PRD may be planning to use such tactics and that they are a legitimate response.

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